

CSICOP at Twenty

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Founded twenty years ago amid controversy and uncertainty, CSICOP is now a well-established part of the contemporary intellectual and scientific landscape. The constructive skepticism it promotes is all the more crucial now with the emergence of global mass media and a seemingly reduced appreciation of the scientific attitude.

A Brief History

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) was established at a specially convened international conference on "The New Irrationalisms: Antiscience and Pseudoscience," April 30 and May 1, 1976, on the newly opened Amherst campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo where I was a philosophy professor at the time. One of the reasons that prompted me to form such a committee was the fact that I helped initiate in late 1975 a statement, "Objections to Astrology," which was endorsed by 186 leading scientists from the National Academy of Sciences, including eighteen Nobel Prize-winners. This statement aroused such an affirmative response that I decided that we needed to go beyond astrology and deal with the wide range of other paranormal claims. The initial call—which I drafted—announcing the formation of a committee read as follows:

There has been an enormous increase in public interest in psychic phenomena, the occult, and pseudoscience. Radio, television, newspapers, books, and mag-

azines are presenting the case for psychic healing, psychokinesis, immortality, reincarnation, Kirlian photography, orgone energy, psychic surgery, faith healing, astrology, the Chariots of the Gods, UFOs, Dianetics, astral projection, exorcism, poltergeists, and the "talents" of Uri Geller, Edgar Cayce, and Jeane Dixon. Often, the least shred of evidence for these claims is blown out of proportion and presented as "scientific" proof.

The statement went on to say that

Many individuals now believe that there is considerable need to organize some strategy of refutation. Perhaps we ought not to assume that the scientific enlightenment will continue indefinitely; for all we know, like the Hellenic civilization, it may be overwhelmed by irrationalism, subjectivism, and obscurantism. Perhaps antiscientific and pseudoscientific irrationalism is only a passing fashion; yet one of the best ways to deal with it is for the scientific and educational community to respond—in a responsible manner—to its alarming growth.

With these thoughts in mind we are forming an organization tentatively called the Committee to Scientifically Investigate Paranormal and Other Phenomena.

The name of the Committee was changed shortly thereafter to its present form.

The statement continued

We wish to make it clear that the purpose of the Committee is not to reject on a priori grounds, antecedent to inquiry, any and all such claims, but rather to examine them openly, completely, objectively, and carefully.

In the statement we speculated about the future course of the Committee by saying that we did not know how large the Committee would become or how ambitious its efforts would be. And we invited leading scientists and experts in many fields to join us in this important venture.

The call was signed by many distinguished scientists, scholars, and skeptics, including George Abell, Isaac Asimov, Antony Flew, Martin Gardner, Sidney Hook, Philip Klass, Ernest Nagel, W. V. Quine, B. F. Skinner, James Randi, Marcello Truzzi, and others. The organizing meeting was held under the auspices of *The Humanist* magazine, which I then edited. I had invited as many skeptical researchers as I could locate to the conference—in all, some 300 people attended.

News of the Committee's formation became immediately known worldwide and was featured in newspapers as diverse as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Pravda*, and science magazines such as *Science*, the *New Scientist*, and *Science News*. Indeed, a story in *Science News*, written by its then editor, Kendrick Frazier, who attended the conference elicited more mail than any other feature then published in that magazine.

The Committee apparently crystallized a widely felt need that there should be some responsible scientific and scholarly body that would ferret out and examine the popular claims that were proliferating in the broader culture. This would have to be an interdisciplinary body that would draw upon specialists in many fields, who would cooperatively investigate claims of

the paranormal.

Later in 1976, CSICOP established a new journal, originally called *The Zetetic*, edited by Marcello Truzzi (who also served as cochairman of the Committee). In the first year, a disagreement about editorial policy ensued between Truzzi and other members of the Executive Council of CSICOP. Truzzi wanted a scholarly sociological magazine, and he wished that parapsychologists be equally represented in its pages. The Executive Council said that there was no avowedly skeptical magazine in existence and it wished to deal not only with scholarly questions but those of popular interest as well. After a vote of no-confidence, Marcello Truzzi resigned. The journal was renamed the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and Kendrick Frazier was unanimously elected its new editor, a position he has held with distinction ever since. (Frazier has outlined the history of CSICOP and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* in an article in the *Encyclopedia of the Paranormal*, 1996, Prometheus Books, Amherst N.Y.).

The *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*'s circulation grew in 20 years from 1,000 to more than 50,000—with little capital and no advertising revenue, supported enthusiastically by its readers.

Heading CSICOP as chairman these twenty years has been exhilarating for me. CSICOP has been embroiled in controversy from the start, attacked on all sides by the disciples of the paranormal—from parapsychologists and astrologers to UFOlogists and alternative health-care therapists. Members of the Executive Council of CSICOP have played a brilliant role on the national and international scene: Phil Klass in keeping alive a skeptical attitude about UFO visitations; Ray Hyman, James Alcock, and Susan Blackmore in carefully examining, in cooperation with parapsychologists, claims of psychic phenomena; Martin Gardner and James Randi in fearlessly debunking the various forms of nonsense offered as gospel truth on the popular scene. There are so many other CSICOP associates who have worked for the cause

that it would be difficult to enumerate them all here.

Many leading scientists have flocked to the banners of CSICOP and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* and have supported our aims. Among our distinguished Fellows and Scientific Consultants are Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, Francis Crick, Glenn Seaborg, Murray Gell-Mann, Elizabeth Loftus, and Milton Rosenberg.

There have been massive efforts to discredit the Committee, and even to destroy it: such as the intemperate attacks on the study of Michel Gauquelin's Mars effect and Klass's spoofing of space alien proponents; Hyman's tangle with parapsychologists; and, in recent years, efforts by Uri Geller, Eldon Byrd, and others to embroil CSICOP and Randi in protracted and costly legal suits. All of these have failed. Today, I am happy to report, CSICOP is alive and well and stronger than ever; and it is now a well-established part of the contemporary intellectual and scientific landscape.

From its inception, CSICOP has been an international organization: its Fellows, Scientific and Technical Consultants, and Executive Council members come from dozens of countries worldwide. CSICOP has helped to organize cognate committees in many parts of the world—the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Mexico, and Australia at first, and later, in an additional twenty or more countries. From its start CSICOP has been a grassroots movement, especially with the formation of forty local and regional groups worldwide. Although these groups are autonomous and independent, we share common goals and methods, and we have formed a unique international network. CSICOP has also helped to initiate and convene meetings in Europe, Canada, Latin America, and elsewhere. The twentieth anniversary will mark the first World Skeptics Congress (to be held June 20–23, 1996). Assuming our international character was inevitable: first because science is international; and second because belief in the paranormal has become a worldwide phenomenon.

CSICOP, the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, and the entire skeptical network have emerged as the "official opposition" to paranormal claims. Leading print and broadcast journalists and media producers constantly come to us for the scientific viewpoint, and we have provided a reliable source of information to scholars and researchers, professionals and lay people. We book guests on hundreds of television and radio programs worldwide annually and we participate in hundreds of news interviews. We are a constant resource for those who need up-to-date information. We need to be fair-minded and ever-ready to examine any responsible claim to any truth, however bizarre. Yet we also need to evaluate the claims as we see them. They are more often than not unproved, uncorroborated, and based on insufficient evidence.

Our unkindly critics call us "the gatekeepers of science," and if we reject a claim they accuse us of being "close-minded." Alas, the role of the skeptic is overshadowed in the media by comparison with the pro-paranormal viewpoint, but at least we have a presence. More important is the fact that the preponderance of scientific opinion generally supports our positions.

Since our inception, we have broadened our subject matter beyond the paranormal to other borderline areas of science: repressed memory, facilitated communication, alternative health cures, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and other interdisciplinary issues that in our view undermine the integrity of science.

Our overall goal is to encourage a responsible approach to the objective examination of paranormal and other unusual claims, and to develop a public appreciation for science, the methods of scientific inquiry, and the need for critical thinking.

CSICOP has expanded its programs enormously. In addition to publishing the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* (now bimonthly) and convening major conferences, we now sponsor a wide range of other activities. We publish (quarterly) the *Skeptical Briefs*; and we have established the Center for Inquiry (shared with the Council for

Secular Humanism). We assist in the production of radio and television programs and thus have become a multimedia center. We have created a major research library of skeptical literature (the John and Mary Frantz Skeptics' Library), and we provide a full range of seminars, workshops, and course curricula. We are also taking the lead in training new skeptical inquirers. The Center for Inquiry encourages research; it serves as a think-tank, attempting to probe the reasons why people believe what they believe and to offer alternative explanations for alleged phenomena. Significantly, we have created a skeptical movement. We have helped to spawn more than 50 skeptical newsletters and magazines, now published by skeptical organizations worldwide—though clearly the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER continues to serve as the main reference source for the entire skeptical movement.

Retrospective Reflections

When we first established CSICOP we did not realize we would elicit such an intense response from the scientific community or the public.

In no small measure, the epidemic of paranormal beliefs is due to the rapid emergence of the mass media on a global scale. These media have virtually replaced the schools, colleges, and universities as the chief conveyors of information. The days of the lone scientist conducting research in the lab or of the isolated scholar writing a paper or book for a limited audience have been bypassed. Today new ideas are popularized—whether half- or fully baked—and they are broadcast far and wide even if they have not been sufficiently tested. Apparently the chief interests of most media conglomerates are entertainment rather than information, profit rather than truth, selling products rather than contributing to the sum of human knowledge. Accordingly, paranormal ideas are pandered to a gullible public and the line between fiction and reality is blurred. Psychic wonders, angelic visitations, Virgin Mary sightings, satanic infes-

tations, weeping icons, miraculous cures, prophetic visions, and other paranormal phenomena are exhibited and marketed along with cereal, chewing gum, cold remedies, and laxatives. The public is often confronted with sensational accounts of hidden realms, and pseudoscience is mistaken for genuine science. Even reputable publishers prefer to publish books touting paranormal claims rather than dispassionate scientific critiques. Why is it that of the thousands of pro-astrology, pro-psychic, or pro-UFO books published, very few (other than those published by Prometheus Books) are skeptical? "They don't sell," is the response of the hallelujah choir within the publishing industry—a sad commentary on our times.

The skeptics thus have a vital role to play: to educate the public about the nature of science and to attempt to persuade media producers and directors that they have some responsibility to develop an appreciation for scientific rationality. One of the roles of CSICOP is to challenge the views of pseudoscience pouring forth daily from the media. It is clear that we cannot operate within the cloistered confines of the academy, but need to enter into the public arena. In monitoring the media, we surely have not sought to censor producers or publishers; we only wish for some balance on their part in presenting paranormal claims, and for some role for skepticism about these claims. Largely because of the media, large sectors of public opinion simply assume that psychic powers are real (clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition), that it is possible to modify material objects merely by the mind (psychokinesis), that psychics can help detectives solve mysteries, that we can abandon the clinical tests of medical science and heal patients by miraculous means, and that the Earth is visited daily by extraterrestrials who are engaging in sexual biogenetic experiments with humans. The number of paranormal, occult, and sci-fi television programs is increasing. Our objection is that "docudramas" are not labeled as fictionalized accounts but touted as fact. In regard to the many talk shows that constantly deal

with paranormal topics, the skeptical viewpoint is rarely heard; and when it is permitted to be expressed, it is usually sandbagged by the host or other guests.

After two decades of toiling in the paranormal marshes, I am persuaded that what we are dealing with in the public is a *quasi-religious phenomenon*. Belief in the paranormal is the poetic equivalent of religion. We live in a culture where any criticisms of the uncorroborated claims of religions are generally considered to be ill-advised or in bad taste. The New Age spirituality that has developed is drenched in occult and paranormal symbols—from near-death experiences to extraterrestrial abductions, from past-life regressions to miraculous healings. This is consistent with the vague religiosity now regnant in modern culture, and especially American society. The popularity of the paranormal worldview, I submit, is a manifestation of what I call the *transcendental temptation*, the tendency of human beings to wish to penetrate the hidden depths of an alleged transcendental reality that cannot be known by using the methods of scientific inquiry. In my view this is a reversion to primitive forms of magical thinking. That is why it is often so difficult to cope with paranormal beliefs, for we are dealing with faith and conviction, not testable theories or hypotheses. This perhaps explains why there is often so much animosity toward science in large sectors of the population, and why antiscientific irrationalism at times overwhelms the dispassionate standards of scientific inquiry. Too many people find the scientific attitude too demanding and rigorous; they want something easier to ingest.

Modern science and technology have transformed the globe and have vastly improved the standards of living and health of large sectors of the population in those societies where it has been applied. Those of us committed to the scientific outlook do not wish to abandon its programmatic goals; we wish to continue to use the methods of science and technology to understand nature and solve human problems. We are willing to suspend judgment about the claims of new forms of reality until they

have been tested; they should at least be falsifiable and they need to run the gauntlet of peer review and replication. In this post-modernist age of nihilistic subjectivity, many intellectuals consider this view to be "outdated," and we are criticized for defending the ideals of the Enlightenment. They reject the view that the methods of science and critical thinking are the most effective procedures for testing truth claims and resolving human problems. We maintain that where the methods of science have been used, they have been eminently successful, and we wish to extend these methods to other areas. The methods of science—measured on a comparative scale with intuition, faith, emotion, and metaphysics—though not perfect, seem to us the best way to gain reliable knowledge.

The *new skepticism* that we defend is positive and constructive, not negative. It is a powerful tool, an indelible part of the process of scientific inquiry. We insist that we need to keep an open mind about all claims to truth, including our own. It is important to point out that unlike many forms of classical skepticism, we do not deny the possibility of knowledge. We believe that there is a body of reliable knowledge that has developed. When we say we are skeptical, we simply demand that objective criteria for evaluating truth claims be respected in a community of inquirers, and rigorous standards be applied not only for evaluating claims on the borderlands of science, but within the entire range of scientific investigations.

The frontiers of science are forever expanding, and this means that we constantly have to be prepared to revise our theories. But the fact that our theories and hypotheses change should not be a cause of despair or uncertainty. The fact that we cannot make absolute or final judgments does not mean that we cannot make any judgments: we insist we still have a body of tested beliefs, and these tell us something about the nature of the expanding evolutionary universe and the place of the human species within it.

Critics maintain that the above account of the universe—based on our reading of the natural, biological, and

behavioral sciences—all too often is excessively *naturalistic* or materialistic, and that it leaves little or no room for spiritual, occult, or paranormal realms. I personally accept the naturalistic interpretation of the universe. However, in being committed to the scientific outlook, I do not deny the vital importance of human creativity in life, or the significance of passions, feelings, and other dimensions of human experience, but I would insist that in searching for testable hypotheses these dimensions are not relevant. Some may choose to reject this interpretation. I respond that if we are to abandon the methods of objective inquiry we need to have good reason and evidence to do so.

The defining characteristic of the new skepticism is that we use objective methods to establish truth claims as nearly as we can and whenever they are applicable. This does not mean that we are opposed to the sense of wonder. The great scientific discoveries of the past four centuries have expanded the boundaries of our understanding. As spacecraft probe our solar system and the galaxies beyond on the macro level, or penetrate the micro level of inanimate and organic matter, we discover hitherto unknown dimensions. Our chief caveat is that intuitive or speculative theories need to be corroborated by valid inference and experimental confirmation.

Not all of those who enthusiastically consult the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* or the *Skeptical Briefs*, or who draw upon CSICOP for the expertise of those associated with it, will accept this broader naturalistic interpretation of the sciences. We are not asking them to do so; yet they may find our unraveling of crop circles, spoon-bendings, spontaneous human combustion, or poltergeists helpful. Our work draws upon the interdisciplinary efforts of many researchers; and rather than depending on the so-called experts in fields such as astrology or UFOlogy, as the case may be, many find the work of the skeptical movement highly instructive in specific areas of interest. In maintaining that the broader interpretation of our world is naturalistic, I have no doubt entered the controversial domain

of the philosophy of science, and in this age of intense specialization, many may not choose to take that step.

Future Prospects

I have briefly reviewed how far we have come in these past twenty years. The question is, Where do we go from here? I would suggest that our work has only just begun, and that there is a continuing need in contemporary culture for the skeptical movement. Would that we *could* go out of business! Alas, there are always new claims, many often more bizarre or outrageous than previous ones (like the "alien autopsy" or "milk-drinking statues"), that emerge and cry out for examination.

Our task in the future will be to continue to function as Socratic gadflies. This is vital, and it means that scientific skepticism should be applied to borderland questions. It means that we need to keep alive our probing critical methods—no matter how much they may infuriate those whom we criticize. But we need to continue to develop in the public an understanding and appreciation for scientific inquiry and the scientific outlook. Our role in this sense is primarily *educative*. CSICOP and the newly developed Center for Inquiry have taken upon themselves this important task.

In the future, we must seek new ways to bring this critical point of view to the general public. We sometimes feel like the lone voice in the wilderness. There are exciting new directions that we plan to take. We believe we have a valuable contribution to make, but we will in the future need to further convince opinion-makers—political and industrial leaders, the directors of corporations, and the masters of the media—that our battle is theirs and that a free and democratic society can survive and prosper only if it keeps alive the appreciation for skepticism and critical thinking. To fulfill this mission in the decades ahead we will need the support of our readers. We are grateful for your loyal help over the past twenty years. We look forward to the challenges of the future, and will continue to serve you. □